

Maria Ossowska: Contexts and Inspirations
Conference on the 40th Anniversary of her Death
University of Warsaw, 24–25 October 2014

Abstract: The text summarizes the international conference commemorating Maria Ossowska, a distinguished Polish ethicist, sociologist of morality, and social philosopher on the 40th anniversary of her death. The event gathered numerous outstanding scholars from various countries and continents, who came to debate her contribution to these disciplines in contemporary times.

Keywords: Maria Ossowska, sociology of morality, international conference.

Maria Ossowska (1896–1976) was a graduate of the University of Warsaw's Philosophy Department, where, with the exception of the years 1952–1956, she held the chair of History and Theory of Morality from 1948 until her retirement. In 1921 she graduated as Doctor in Philosophy at the University of Warsaw and in 1932 was awarded the habilitation and began to work at the University of Warsaw Department of Philosophy. Her mentor in philosophy was Tadeusz Kotarbiński, one of the leading members in the Lvov-Warsaw Philosophical School, author of the neo-positivist program of reductionist reism, new philosophy of action called praxeology and the independent ethics. In 1933–1935 she took part in the seminars of Bronisław Malinowski and George E. Moore at London School of Economics and got in contact with Bertrand Russell. Returning to Warsaw she began her work on a new academic discipline: the descriptive theory of morality. During the German occupation together with her husband Stanislaw Ossowski, the future co-founder of the International Sociological Association, she took part in the clandestine Warsaw University curriculum, and she also helped to hide the Jewish children from the Nazi persecution. The manuscript she completed had been saved from the burning of Warsaw by the German forces after the fall of Warsaw Insurrection in 1944 and published in 1947 as *The Foundation of the Science of Morals*, in Polish, thanks to the subsidy by the Swedish government. Under the occupation she also published in clandestine the pamphlet on the Paragon of Citizen in Democratic Society, reprinted several times later whenever the political circumstances were favorable. Her work, which was largely empirical, included such questions as the essence, genesis, conditioning, and differentiation of moral phenomena. When Communist authorities forbade her to teach at the University in

1952–1956 she wrote the extensive study on the Bourgeois Morality published in 1956. Maria Ossowska's manifold interests are reflected in the varied subject matter of the conference devoted to her.¹

The Conference 'Maria Ossowska: Contexts and Inspirations' was organized by the Institute of Applied Social Sciences of the University of Warsaw, with the IASS Foundation of the University of Warsaw, under the patronage of Lena Kolarska-Bobińska, Minister of Science and Higher Education, and Małgorzata Fuszara, Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment.

The first day of the conference began with an awards ceremony for the winners of an essay contest on the question 'Can the categories suggested by Maria Ossowska help in analyzing ethical discourse in contemporary Poland, and if so, how?' The first prize was received by Małgorzata Karolina Steć, a doctoral student at Marie Curie-Skłodowska University (Lublin), for a work entitled 'Maria Ossowska's Categories of Descriptive Ethics and Contemporary Discourse on Teaching Ethics in Polish Schools'. An honorable mention was awarded to Dorota Żurkowska (University of Warsaw), for an essay entitled 'Contemporary Polish Society: the Challenges for Studying Morality'.

After the awards presentation, the key memorial lecture ('What Are Moral Norms and What Makes Them Political?') was given by Steven Lukes of New York University. He attempted to answer the question of whether norms are moral and what makes them political. The central issue concerned what authority any given set of moral norms can claim and on what basis we, as humanists, can arrive at our value judgments. On the one hand we may have a universal outlook on morality, but on the other, in the world of multiculturalism and the politics of recognition, we find it difficult to justify any particular sets of standards, so we are left with the relativistic standpoint. Steven Lukes continued his lecture by posing the need to address questions concerning: practices and beliefs which do or do not raise moral dilemmas, the level of moral disagreement underlying all the apparent diversity of beliefs and practices, and the location of the moral disagreements ('cultures' and 'religions'). He claimed that in order to arrive at an understanding of moral disagreement we need to recognize its prevalence both within and across religious and cultural boundaries. The still unresolved issue remains on what basis the humanist can resist the moral relativist, so he continued by juxtaposing the "Kantian" and "Aristotelian" solutions to that question, represented by, respectively, Jürgen Habermas and Martha Nussbaum recently, presenting their arguments as the strongest ways of defending the humanist side of the debate.

The further part of the first day of the conference was composed of four thematic sessions. The first one concerned morality and public life. Marcin Król from the University of Warsaw gave a lecture on 'Why Maria Ossowska's Model of the Citizen in Democracy is Increasingly Current', while Joanna Kurczewska from the Polish Academy of Sciences spoke on the topicality of Maria Ossowska's thinking for 'difficult and troubled times'. The second session addressed the issue of the relation

¹ Refer to: <http://ossowska.isns.uw.edu.pl/eng/conference.html>

between morality and religion; the first speaker was Krzysztof Kiciński (University of Warsaw), who presented the basic trends of evolution in Poles' moral awareness ('Directions in the Evolution of Poles' Moral Awareness'). Later, Janusz Mariański (Catholic University of Lublin) outlined how Maria Ossowska's work is perceived by the Catholic academic community. The last speaker of the session, Wojciech Pawlik (University of Warsaw), analyzed the question of conscience as a category of the sociology of morality and in the public discourse. Speakers in the third session (both from the University of Warsaw) talked on issues of morality and related questions: Iwona Jakubowska-Branicka presented two concepts of justice, while Małgorzata Melchior traced the inspiration for Maria Ossowska's sociology of morality in studies of the extreme situations (Shoah). The topics of the third session were continued in the afternoon session: the report of Beata Łaciak (University of Warsaw) combined issues of morality and customs, and the presentation by Ewa Nowicka (University of Warsaw) considered the relation between anthropology and Maria Ossowska's thought. In the last panel session, Jan Woleński (Jagiellonian University) presented the science of morality as a case of implementation of the Science of Science project published with Stanisław Ossowski in *Organon*, Volume I (1936), Number 1, pp. 1–12, while Jerzy Szacki (University of Social Sciences and Humanities) profiled Maria Ossowska as a historian of ideas (*Bourgeois Morality* 1956 in Polish; *Moral Thought of British Enlightenment* 1966 in Polish).

The first day ended with a remembrance session conducted by Róża Sufek, collecting personal memories about Maria Ossowska as a person from her former students and relatives: Magdalena Jasińska, Krzysztof Kiciński, Jadwiga Koralewicz, Joanna Kurczewska, Jacek Kurczewski, Ewa Nowicka, and Barbara Otwinowska.

The second day was devoted to comparing the former and new sociology of morality in the context of the debate between academics of various countries, and thus English was the language of this day's session. Edoardo Fittipaldi of the University of Milan spoke on the question of the concept of morality in Ossowska's analyses, objecting to her not having created a proper definition of morality. While he admitted that Ossowska's works continue to be extremely precious sources of information for social scientists, he pointed out the need of formulating another type of definition of moral phenomena. Fittipaldi, following Jerzy Lande, opposed Ossowska's approach to Leon Petrażycki's and Karl Popper's, and claimed that there is a grave need of stipulatively-devised sociological concepts (as opposed to practical or social concepts). Małgorzata Fuszara (University of Warsaw and the Government Plenipotentiary for Equal Treatment) spoke on the question of the prestige of law in the contemporary context observing that 30 years ago, collaborator of Ossowska, Adam Podgórecki made the first empirical study in Poland on the *Prestige of Law* (1966, in Polish) and its relations with morality in the public opinion. Jacek Kurczewski (University of Warsaw) presented the project carried out in the years 2010–2012, (cf. *Reconciliation in the Bloodlands*, Jacek Kurczewski (ed.), Peter Lang 2014) in which reconciliatory actions undertaken by religious, civic and political authorities were studied and claimed that the intense emotional experiences together with the rational calculus needed to be mediated through the public re-enactment of unifying normative premises and

unifying ex-tasis as the necessary mechanism of altering the reality of co-existence. Additionally, the relation of the ethics of reconciliation with the chivalry ethos as analyzed by Ossowska (*Chivalry Ethos and Its Varieties*, 1973, in Polish) was discussed.

After the break, in the last session of the conference, Gabriel Abend (New York University) discussed the problem of 'What Morality Is Underlain by'. Basing his research on the acknowledgment of Maria Ossowska's pioneering plea for an empirical sociology of morality, he claimed that while the behavioral and the normative levels of moral objects are well investigated, the moral background level has not been satisfactorily analyzed yet. By "moral background" he referred to the set of second-order elements that underlie and enable the behavioral and normative levels. Mark Cooney of the University of Georgia based his presentation on the claim that morality is not just a system of ideas but a system of behavior, 'as amenable to prediction and explanation as any other form of human conduct'. The project of pure sociology explains morality with its location, direction, and movement in social space. He showed its practical example by using an analysis of data concerning the definition and reaction to homicide in various societies. Steve Hitlin (University of Iowa) in his presentation discussed the problem of fundamental moral sentiments across cultures. The project presented by him examined, both theoretically and empirically, the structural underpinnings of morality and made the strong claim that societal inequality leads to different forms of morality and the experience of moral emotions. Masayuki Murayama of the University of Meiji in Tokyo addressed the question of what is important in directing human behavior, using the example of analyses of changes in Japan's legal culture during the post-war transformation of the political system. The Japanese modernization process required transplantation of the Western law that was considered foreign to Japanese people. While the governing elites tried to construct a nation state by relying on a patriarchal family model, the spirit of the imported Western law seemed to contradict the traditional morality, which constituted an interesting research area for the Japanese sociologist of law, Takeyoshi Kawashima. Murayama presented the empirical data to test some of Kawashima's hypotheses, namely that people's normative attitudes would change with a change of social structure and that Japanese normative attitudes would discourage Japanese people from bringing lawsuits and would result in the small number of lawyers. The last presenter, Jacek Hołowka from the University of Warsaw presented Maria Ossowska as one of the representatives of the Warsaw school of philosophy pointing to her early publication in semantics and analytical approach. An open debate, in which all the attendees participated, ended the conference.

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